



Thematic Comparison in Select Dalit Autobiographies: A Comparative Study of Joothan, The Outcaste, Government Brahmana, and Karukku

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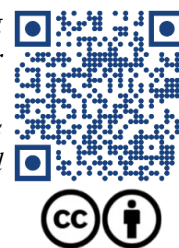
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Received: 24 Feb 2026; Received in revised form: 26 Mar 2026; Accepted: 01 Apr 2026; Available online: 05 Apr 2026

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Abstract— *Dalit autobiography has become one of the most important modes of modern Indian life writing because it joins personal memory with collective history. This paper offers a thematic comparison of four major Dalit autobiographies: Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan, Sharankumar Limbale's The Outcaste, Aravind Malagatti's Government Brahmana, and Bama's Karukku. The study argues that these works transform autobiography into testimony, social critique, and resistance writing. Across linguistic and regional differences, the four texts repeatedly engage with caste oppression, untouchability, poverty, labor, humiliation, educational struggle, gendered marginalization, religious contradiction, fractured identity, and the search for dignity. At the same time, each text gives these themes a distinct shape: Joothan foregrounds everyday humiliation and material deprivation; The Outcaste intensifies identity crisis and psychological fracture; Government Brahmana highlights irony, institutional contradiction, and modern caste continuities; and Karukku brings a strong Dalit feminist and spiritual critique. The paper concludes that Dalit autobiography is not only a record of suffering but also a literary form of awakening, self-assertion, and ethical resistance.*



Keywords— *Dalit autobiography, caste oppression, untouchability, identity, resistance, gender, memory, thematic comparison*

I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit autobiography differs from conventional autobiography because it does not center primarily on private self-development in a socially neutral world. Instead, it records the making of the self within structures of caste oppression, humiliation, exclusion, and struggle. This work correctly frames this genre as a space where the personal becomes social, historical, and political. This is also consistent with broader scholarship on Dalit life writing, which reads these narratives as collective testimony rather than merely individual confession (Hunt, 2014).

The four selected texts are especially suitable for comparative analysis because they represent different

linguistic and cultural locations while sharing a common anti-caste impulse: Valmiki writes from the Hindi sphere, Limbale from Marathi Dalit writing, Malagatti from Kannada, and Bama from Tamil Dalit Christian experience. Their English editions and scholarly reception confirm their centrality in Dalit studies (Saha, 2025).

Objectives of the Study :

The paper has four main objectives:

- To compare the major themes in Joothan, The Outcaste, Government Brahmana, and Karukku.
- To examine how caste oppression shape identity, labor, education, family, and social relations.
- To analyze how gender and religion deepen or complicate Dalit experience.

To show how autobiographical writing becomes a mode of resistance and self-assertion.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a comparative thematic method. Instead of reading the four autobiographies as isolated life stories, it

groups them by recurring thematic concerns: caste oppression and untouchability, poverty and deprivation, education and awakening, labor and exploitation, gender and marginalization, religion and spiritual crisis, identity and selfhood, family/community relations, and memory. That thematic framework is directly drawn from the work (Raman & Saha, 2025).

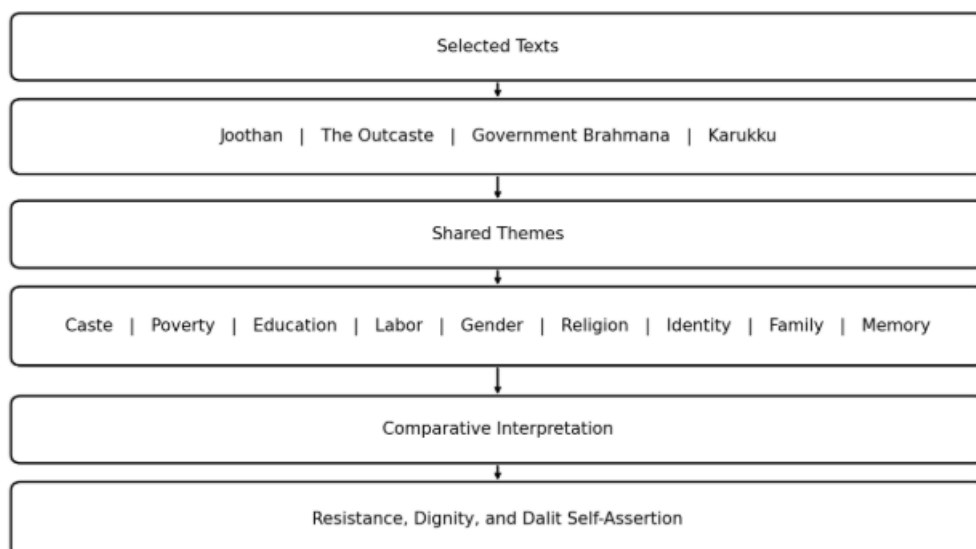


Fig.1. Comparative thematic framework

The above figure presents a comparative thematic framework for four Dalit autobiographies: Joothan, The Outcaste, Government Brahmana, and Karukku. It shows how these texts are studied through shared themes such as caste, poverty, education, labor, gender, religion, identity, family, and memory, leading to comparative interpretation centered on resistance, dignity, and self-assertion (Jeffrey et al., 2004).

Table 1. Corpus of the study

Text	Author	Broad emphasis
Joothan	Omprakash Valmiki	Untouchability, humiliation, food, education
The Outcaste	Sharankumar Limbale	Illegitimacy, fractured identity, hunger, exclusion
Government Brahmana	Aravind Malagatti	Irony, institutional caste, mobility and contradiction
Karukku	Bama	Dalit feminism, religion, caste, gender, resistance

The thematic arrangement aligns closely with current scholarship on Dalit autobiography, especially readings

that treat these texts as life narratives of social witness and anti-caste critique.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Caste Oppression and Untouchability

Caste oppression is the foundational theme in all four texts. In Joothan, untouchability is experienced materially and bodily through food, segregation, labor, and school humiliation. In The Outcaste, caste appears not only as exclusion but as a crisis of belonging and legitimacy. In Government Brahmana, caste survives within modern institutions and social labeling. In Karukku, caste is intensified by gender and by its persistence inside Christian institutions (Dutta et al., 2018).

Poverty and Deprivation

The four autobiographies show that Dalit poverty is not accidental; it is structurally produced by caste hierarchy. In Joothan, hunger and scraps of food become symbols of humiliation. In The Outcaste, poverty is joined to emotional insecurity and identity fracture. In Government Brahmana, economic hardship continues to haunt the subject even after educational mobility. In Karukku, deprivation is gendered, with Dalit women bearing disproportionate labor and social disrespect (Deshpande, 2002).

Education and Awakening

Education is one of the strongest instruments of transformation across the four texts, though it is always mediated by insult and exclusion. In *Joothan*, school becomes a site of humiliation but also of awakening. In *The Outcaste*, education helps the narrator interpret his suffering socially rather than privately. In *Government Brahmana*, education opens mobility but also reveals the subtle persistence of prejudice. In *Karukku*, it generates caste, gender, and spiritual awareness, making education not just academic progress but ethical awakening (Sukumar, 2022).

Labor and Exploitation

All four works present labor as caste-structured rather than freely chosen. In *Joothan*, labor is degrading and tied to untouchability. In *The Outcaste*, labor is inseparable from hunger and survival. In *Government Brahmana*, even where mobility appears possible, caste memory and symbolic devaluation remain. In *Karukku*, labor is sharply gendered: Dalit women perform backbreaking work inside and outside the home while remaining underpaid and socially disrespected (Menon, 2022).

Gender and Marginalization

The comparative importance of gender becomes clearest in *Karukku*, which gives a full Dalit feminist voice to caste experience. Yet gender is also present in the other autobiographies through mothers, sisters, and female family members whose labor and suffering sustain family survival. The male-authored texts often register women's pain indirectly, while Bama makes it central. This difference is crucial: it shows that Dalit oppression is not uniform but intersectional, shaped by caste, patriarchy, labor, and religion together (Nanditha, 2021).

Religion and Spiritual Crisis

Religion appears in these autobiographies less as consolation than as contradiction. In *Joothan* and *The Outcaste*, religion is implicated in caste hierarchy and moral exclusion. In *Government Brahmana*, inherited caste

ideology continues under modern institutional surfaces. In *Karukku*, the contradiction is most explicit: Christianity, which promises equality, is shown reproducing caste prejudice. Bama's crisis is therefore both spiritual and institutional, making *Karukku* central to any analysis of religion in Dalit autobiography (Pariyar & Lovett, 2016).

Identity, Selfhood, and Resistance

All four autobiographies portray identity as contested rather than naturally given. Valmiki's selfhood is forged against humiliation. Limbale's selfhood is fractured by illegitimacy and social non-belonging. Malagatti's selfhood is shaped by irony and contradiction in supposedly progressive institutions. Bama's selfhood is formed through caste, gender, and spiritual struggle. Resistance, accordingly, takes different forms: education, truth-telling, irony, feminist critique, and autobiographical writing itself (Kukreja, 2017).

Family, Community, and Social Relations

Family is both a shelter and a site of pain in all four texts. Mothers and fathers teach endurance, labor, and dignity; siblings reflect shared marginalization; community gives solidarity but also reveals inherited limitations. Social relations outside the Dalit community—especially with teachers, landlords, employers, priests, and upper-caste villagers—expose the everyday operation of hierarchy. The work is especially strong on this point: the self is always shaped by relational worlds, not isolated individual experience (Varman & Meshram, 2024).

Memory and Autobiographical Expression

These texts turn memory into testimony. In *Joothan*, memory recovers humiliation and refuses silence. In *The Outcaste*, memory is fragmented and wounded, mirroring identity fracture. In *Government Brahmana*, memory works through irony and critique. In *Karukku*, memory is immediate, spoken, searching, and ethically charged. Across all four, autobiography becomes not just recollection but a form of historical correction: it restores Dalit lives to literature on Dalit terms (Hunt, 2014).

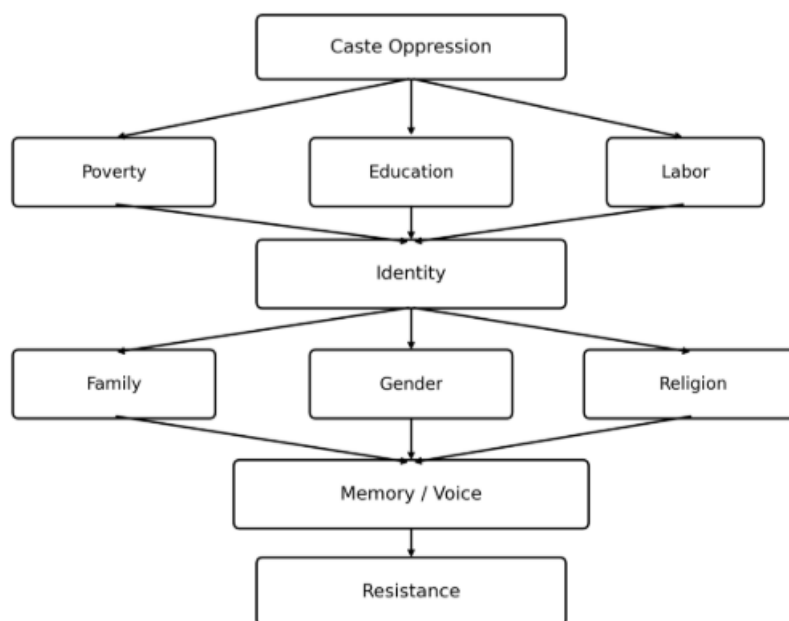


Fig.2. Thematic intersections across the four autobiographies

The above figure illustrates the thematic flow in the four autobiographies. Caste oppression stands at the top, leading to poverty, education, and labor, which shape identity. Identity further connects with family, gender, and

religion, culminating in memory and voice. Finally, these experiences develop into resistance, highlighting Dalit struggle and self-assertion.

Table 2. Comparative thematic map

Theme	Joothan	The Outcaste	Government Brahmana	Karukku
Untouchability	Direct, material	Social and psychological	Institutional and symbolic	Social, religious, gendered
Poverty	Hunger and leftovers	Hunger and instability	Hardship plus stigma	Poverty plus women's labor
Education	Humiliation + awakening	Identity formation	Mobility contradiction +	Feminist and moral awakening
Labor	Degrading caste labor	Labor for survival	Memory of labor and stigma	Double labor of Dalit women
Identity	Self-respect against insult	Fractured belonging	Ironic, reflexive self	Dalit feminist selfhood
Resistance	Assertion through education and writing	Truth-telling and protest	Critical irony	Voice, refusal, feminist critique

The table presents a comparative thematic view of the four autobiographies by showing how each text expresses common Dalit concerns in different ways. Joothan highlights direct untouchability, hunger, degrading labour, and resistance through education and writing. The Outcaste emphasizes psychological suffering, instability, identity crisis, and protest through truth-telling. Government Brahmana presents caste through institutional contradiction, stigma, ironic self-awareness, and critical

resistance. Karukku brings a distinct Dalit feminist perspective, where untouchability is social, religious, and gendered, and poverty and labour are deeply connected with women's experience. Overall, the table shows both thematic unity and diversity in Dalit autobiographical writing.

IV. CONCLUSION

A thematic comparison of Joothan, The Outcaste, Government Brahmana, and Karukku shows that Dalit autobiography is simultaneously literature, testimony, and resistance. These texts do not merely narrate hardship; they document how caste shapes food, labor, education, religion, social relations, identity, and memory itself. The work rightly treats these themes as interconnected rather than isolated.

The comparison also shows that unity and diversity coexist in Dalit life writing. The four autobiographies share a common structure of oppression, yet differ in emotional texture, regional context, institutional focus, and gendered experience. Valmiki foregrounds humiliation and self-respect; Limbale foregrounds fragmentation and belonging; Malagatti foregrounds irony and institutional contradiction; Bama foregrounds Dalit feminist and spiritual resistance. Together, they redefine autobiography as a form through which the marginalized speak historically, ethically, and politically.

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